

Second major quake in Nepal deepens political crisis

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Three weeks after a 7.8 Richter scale earthquake hit Nepal on April 25, the poverty-stricken Himalayan nation was hit last Tuesday by a 7.3 magnitude aftershock killing over 125 people and injuring more than 2,500. The epicentre was in a remote area of Dolakha, east of the capital, Kathmandu and near Mount Everest. Seventeen people were killed in the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and one in Tibet, with tremors felt as far away as New Delhi and Bangladesh.

“The land has cracked open in many places, many people don’t even have a spot to put their tents,” said Krishna Siwakoti, a farmer who lives near the epicentre told CNN. “The situation is dire. We are isolated,” he said, adding that the quake had set off landslides “all around us.”

Tuesday’s quake, one of more than 90 that have hit the country since April 25, has worsened the already disastrous social conditions throughout Nepal and deepened the country’s political crisis. On Saturday, further aftershocks were felt. The strongest was 5.7 magnitude and occurred 76 kilometres from Kathmandu, adding to fears among the population.

The April 25 earthquake, the most devastating to hit Nepal since 1934, killed over 8,400 and injured about 17,000 people.

Successive Nepalese governments, including the current Nepal Congress Party-led administration, ignored seismologists’ warnings and took no serious measures to lessen the social impact of anticipated major quakes. Nepal Prime Minister Susil Koirala admitted last week that even after the first earthquake his government had not prepared for a second major quake.

According to UN reports, more than eight million people have been affected by the disaster with over 3.5 million in need of food aid. In some areas, villagers are

reportedly seizing food trucks. Nearly 289,000 houses have been destroyed and more than 254,000 damaged. Thousands of people are still living in makeshift tents or without shelter, medicine and drinking water or health care facilities.

Basic infrastructure, such as roads, electricity and water, has been seriously damaged throughout the country. According to preliminary estimates, 92,000 tonnes of food stocks, 59,000 livestock and 630,000 poultry birds have been destroyed.

Caroline Anning, Save the Children’s emergency response spokesperson, told the media that Tuesday’s tremor had destroyed hundreds more houses and further damaged basic infrastructure. “At least a dozen landslides in places like Sindhupalchok and Gorkha ... have blocked access to roads that had been cleared,” she said.

Thousands of people were reluctant to return to their homes, Anning said, and were joining the masses of people sleeping in temporary shelters. “I’ve spoken to families and met people whose homes are already destroyed and are sleeping out in the open and saying that their children are absolutely terrified at night—that they don’t know what to do or where to go, that they don’t know what advice to listen to.” Earthquake survivors, she added, desperately needed shelter to protect them from heavy monsoonal rains which are due to hit the country at the end of this month.

UNICEF’s Nepal representative Tomoo Hozumi said: “More than 5,000 schools have been damaged and 1,000 destroyed. Almost one million children who were enrolled in schools before the earthquake could now find they have no school building to return to.”

While between \$US5 and \$10 billion is required to overcome the devastation and restore rudimentary infrastructure, aid promised by the advanced capitalist

countries is a pittance. The UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, which called for \$423 million in emergency aid, has received just \$59 million since the first earthquake struck.

Popular opposition is mounting against the government and all the parties of Nepalese political establishment. According to the media reports, Madhav Kumar Nepal, head of the Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), was denounced by villagers when he visited Basantapur and Sankhu.

Nepal’s establishment parties all fear that the grossly inadequate government response to the disaster and long-running popular discontent and anger over rising poverty will produce a major social and political crisis throughout the country.

The opposition Unified Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist (UCPN-M) has called for a government of national unity including all political parties. UCPN-M leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal told the Xinhua news agency: “In this difficult period in history, we should come together ... This is a challenge and an opportunity to come to a consensus to draft the constitution.”

Efforts to form a national unity government have intensified. Dahal held two round of talks with K.P. Sharma Oli, chairman of the CPN-UML, which is part of the ruling coalition led by Nepali Congress. According to UCPN-M general secretary Krishna Bahadur Mahara, negotiations have also taken place with leaders of the Nepali Congress but it is insisting that such a government could only be formed under the current prime minister.

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In 2006, the UCPN-M formed an alliance with other Nepali capitalist parties to abort a mass uprising against the ruling monarchy. The Maoists abandoned their long-running guerrilla struggle. Following elections, they formed an interim government and a constitutional assembly to write a constitution. Similarly the latest UCPN-M appeal for a new bourgeois alliance is to suppress another major eruption of struggles by Nepali workers and the rural poor.

The US has seized on the earthquake disaster to advance its own strategic interests as part of the “pivot to Asia” and its military encirclement of China. Washington is using the provision of relief aid via the US military to establish a strategic foothold in Nepal,

which lies on the border with China.

On May 4, the Nepali government called for the withdrawal of aid organisations from 34 countries, claiming that the evacuation operation was over. Media reports indicate aid groups are still engaged in Nepal and US troops have established a significant presence. About 300 US marines are currently working with the Nepal army. On the day of the second earthquake, a US helicopter crashed in a remote district killing six marines and two Nepali soldiers on board.

American military personnel in Nepal include marines, sailors and airmen. On May 8, the *Marine Times* reported that “thousands of Marines and sailors are on standby and awaiting orders.”

Air Force Brig. Gen. Michael Minihan said “We’ve set up an intermediate staging base [at the U-Tapao air base in Thailand] that can help airpower and airlift, specifically US Marine and Air Force (capabilities), and rapidly move those unique capabilities in and out of Nepal.”

The *Pacific Air Forces* web site further noted that the “U.S. Pacific Command activated JTF [Joint Task Force] 505 on May 1 to work closely with the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and other U.S. agencies to ensure a timely and thorough response to requests by the government of Nepal.”

All this makes clear that Washington is using the Nepal earthquake disaster as a military dress rehearsal for future operations in the region.



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